

Drunks: A Poem

We died of pneumonia in furnished rooms
where they found us three days later
when somebody complained about the smell
we died against bridge abutments
and nobody knew if it was suicide
and we probably didn't know ourselves
except in the sense that it was always suicide
we died in hospitals
our stomachs huge, distended
and there was nothing they could do
we died in cells
never knowing whether we were guilty or not.

We went to priests
they gave us pledges
they told us to pray
they told us to go and sin no more,
but go
we tried and we died

we died of overdoses
we died in bed
(but usually not the Big Bed)
we died in straitjackets
in the DTs seeing God knows what
creeping skittering slithering
shuffling things

And you know what the worst thing was?
The worst thing was that nobody ever believed
how hard we tried

We went to doctors and they gave us stuff to take
that would make us sick when we drank
on the principle of so crazy, it just might work, I guess
or they sent us places like Dropkick Murphy's

and when we got out we were hooked on paraldehyde
or maybe we lied to the doctors
and they told us don't drink so much
just drink like me
and we tried
and we died

we drowned in our own vomit
or choked on it
our broken jaws wired shut
we died playing Russian roulette
and everybody thought we'd lost
we died under the hooves of horses
under the wheels of vehicles
under the knives and bootheels of our brother drunks
we died in shame

And you know what was even worse?
was that we couldn't believe it ourselves
that we had tried
and we died believing that didn't know
what it *meant* to try

When we were desperate or hopeful or
deluded or embattled enough to ask for help
we went to people with letters after their names
and prayed that they might have read the right books
that had the right words in them
never suspecting the terrifying truth
that the right words, as simple as they were
had not been written yet

We died falling off girders on high buildings
because of course ironworkers drink
of course they do
we died with a shotgun in our mouth
or jumping off a bridge
and everybody knew it *was* suicide
we died under the Southeast Expressway
with our hands tied behind us
and a bullet in the back of our head
because this time the people that we disappointed
were the *wrong* people
we died in convulsions, or of "insult to the brain"
incontinent, and in disgrace, abandoned
if we were women, we died degraded,
because women have so much more to live up to

we tried and we died and nobody cried

And the very worst thing
was that for every one of us who died
there were another hundred of us, or another thousand
who wished that we *would* die
who went to sleep praying we would not have to wake up
because what we were enduring was intolerable
and we knew in our hearts
it wasn't ever gonna change

One day in a hospital room in New York City
one of us had what the books call
a "transforming spiritual experience"
and he said to himself

I've got it
(*no you haven't you've only got part of it*)

and I have to share it
(*now you've ALMOST got it*)

and he tried to give it away
but we couldn't hear it
the transmission line wasn't open yet
we tried to hear it
we tried and we died

we died of one last cigarette
the comfort of its glowing in the dark
we passed out and the bed caught fire
they said we suffocated before our body burned
they said we never felt a thing
that was the *best* way maybe that we died
except sometimes we took our family with us

And the man in New York was so sure he had it
he tried to love us into sobriety
but that didn't work either,
love confuses drunks
still he tried and still we died
one after another we got his hopes up
and we broke his heart, because
that's what we do

And the very worst thing of all the worst things
was that every time we thought we knew

what the worst thing was,
something happened that was even worse

Until a day came in a hotel lobby
and it wasn't in Rome, or Jerusalem, or Mecca
or even Dublin, or South Boston
it was in Akron, Ohio, for Christ's sake

a day came when the man said
I have to find a drunk
because I need him as much as he needs me
(NOW
you've got it)

and the transmission line
after all those years
was open
the transmission line was open

And now we don't go to priests
and we don't go to doctors
and people with letters after their names
we come to people who have been there
we come to each other
and we try
and we don't have to die

—Jack McC